

Mentoring--From the Mentor's Perspective

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Why would anyone want to serve as a mentor? Mentoring consumes time and energy, and there's no direct or immediate reward. Sometimes, starting a relationship can be a little awkward. And what if the chemistry isn't right? Isn't it possible that the whole relationship could disintegrate (or worse yet, blow up), generating disappointment for both parties? What about the potential downside to my reputation?

All that may be true, but if you've ever been involved in a mentoring relationship, you've experienced firsthand the kind of growth that occurs. Growth for the mentee is expected, of course. But often, the mentor is stretched and also has an abundance of paradigm shifts in the process.

Maybe you have fond memories of the benefits you gained from having a mentor, and you want to provide a similar experience for a younger colleague. Or maybe you never had a mentor and realized that if a competent, caring individual had encouraged and nurtured you, your career would have developed faster and more fully. Perhaps you vowed you'd look for opportunities to do for others what was never done for you.

Perhaps you see in a young person some potential that has not yet developed. Or maybe you love the feeling of healthy collaboration with another dedicated, energetic, aspiring individual. Maybe you'd like to increase your reputation among your peers. Or you might just have a genuine desire to serve. Finally, you realize you'll probably gain some valuable insights along the way!

What does the mentor deliver to the relationship? The mentor's primary role is to create a trusting and safe environment. No one wants to appear foolish or irrelevant in front of a more experienced person. Yet for the relationship to work, the mentee will have to expose his or her doubts and opportunities for improvement.

Opening up to share fears and disappointments is difficult for many individuals, yet any of us can learn much by examining mistakes and failures. Bringing these out into the light for examination requires that the mentee feel confident that there will be no ridicule or embarrassment. The mentor must have deep, receptive listening skills. Further, the mentor establishes a spirit of encouragement and optimism in the relationship.

The mentor shares general principles learned from reading, feedback, and extensive experience obtained over many years. The mentor is rarely seduced into answering the common question, "What should I do?" Instead, the mentor joins with the mentee in creatively generating options for what responses are possible.

The mentor offers ideas for potential actions, inspiring the mentee to create bolder and more assertive possibilities. Once they've generated an array of options, the mentor helps the mentee clarify the desired outcome. They then evaluate each option, estimating its probability of delivering that preferred consequence.

Throughout this process, the mentor asks thought-provoking open-ended questions. Rather than think for the mentee, the mentor serves as a stimulant. Realizing the limited experience of the mentee, the mentor is constantly seeking to expand his or her conceptual thinking.

The mentor celebrates the expanding capability and success of the mentee. However, the mentor also holds the mentee accountable for meeting commitments. That means having the mentee identify explicit action steps with targeted timeframes. To be effective, the mentor must have a system for following up.

Why does a mentor stay in a mentoring relationship? Early in the relationship, the mentor may suggest questions or themes for discussion. These are typically principle-based topics that might be relevant to any developing individual. Soon, however, the responsibility for identifying issues for exploration transitions to the mentee. That is, the mentee starts to "pull" on the experience of the mentor to address specific agenda items. The mentor doesn't have time or energy to be concerned with guessing what might be helpful to the mentee.

Further, the issues the mentee wants to address must become subsequently more challenging. Although this demonstrates the mentee's growth, it continues to stretch the mentor. Many opportunities vie for the mentor's time and attention. If the mentor is not being stretched, meetings with the mentee can become boring. No one wants to stay in a relationship that provides little personal satisfaction.

The mentoring relationship exists primarily to develop the potential of the mentee. If the mentee continues to grow and the mentor remains challenged to grow as well, the relationship can continue for a very long time.

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